

**The Woolloowin Madgalen Asylum and
Holy Cross Laundry:
A Symbiotic Dependency**

4 October 2016

Dr Sue Keays

‘The objects of the institution will be to afford shelter and to provide the means of earning an honest livelihood, to all fallen women, irrespective of creed, who express willingness to abandon their sinful course of life.’

Robert Dunne, Archbishop of Brisbane, blessing the Foundation Stone of the Woolloowin Magdalen Asylum on 22 April 1888.¹

The Woolloowin Magdalen Asylum, or Women’s Refuge in modern terminology, was established in 1888-1889 primarily to accommodate, support and rehabilitate unmarried mothers throughout pregnancy and childbirth and to ensure that their babies were well cared for and given a good start in life before being adopted out. The Queensland Government, not the refuge, was the agency that supervised the adoptions. Not all the females admitted, however, were single mothers. The Sisters of Mercy also took in women and girls in trouble for other reasons, including those referred by state authorities. The

refuge offered immediate shelter and protection to women who sought ‘protection from their former companions and surroundings’ (ie victims of domestic violence), and young girls who were ‘so situated that there was fear of their taking a downward step’.² By the 1920s the refuge was firmly established as ‘a home for women and girls needing help or protection’, but the tenor began to change when the Sisters began admitting adolescent girls referred by the Police Courts and were forced to implement greater security controls.

This paper will focus on the Holy Cross Laundry that was established by the Sisters of Mercy as an industry to provide a steady income for the Magdalen Asylum so that it could be self-funding and provide industrial training for the girls and women who passed through the refuge. The laundry was ‘a means to an end, the end being the furtherance of the philanthropic scheme of the institution’.³ For the Sisters, the home and laundry formed an interdependent singular unit, one and the same.

Along with the substantial ongoing costs of supporting 70-120 women and 30 or so infants, the Sisters incurred high capital costs associated with the construction of both the refuge and laundry, and then fitting out the laundry with expensive specialist industrial equipment. They relied on the physical labour of the residents to run the laundry – although the Sisters also worked in the laundry both as workers and in a supervising capacity. Part of their mission was to train the girls in the use of industrial laundry equipment so that they could find work on their release. For safety reasons proper training

was important. For the first fifty years, the laundry ran on steam power which is generated by heating water under pressurised conditions to produce superheated steam that is far hotter and potentially more dangerous than boiling water. The old boiler was not replaced until the 1980s when an oil burner was installed and the original chimney demolished.

There is no doubt that laundry work was hot, steamy, taxing work, especially in the humid Queensland summers, and which, presumably, as industrial-scale work, would have necessitated heavy lifting and long hours standing on a concrete floor; all of which were unsuited to heavily pregnant women or girls, and not relished by the non-pregnant residents. Although little is known about the personal experiences of early residents at Woolloowin, we do know from recent official investigations, media attention and the personal testimonies of former residents (generally women born in the 1940s-1960s) that institutional abuse was widespread in Australia. The Australian Senate's 'Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care,' 2002-2004 confirmed that abuse did occur at the Magdalen homes. Its official report *The Forgotten Australians Report 2003–04* was based on a substantial volume of empirical evidence and painfully recalled personal testimonies that leave us in no doubt that the women and girls resented having to work in the Magdalen Laundries. These investigations, along with various media reports and web sources, have given the Magdalen Asylums a bad press in recent years. Damning written accounts and interview transcripts submitted to the Royal Commission are openly available on the Australian Government

website.⁴ One of the Senate's respondents Rachel Romero, a self-professed 'laundry slave,' expressed her feelings very compellingly through a suite of paintings that were exhibited at the National Gallery, Canberra.⁵

The purpose of this paper is not to delve into the wrongs and rights of the Magdalen Asylum system, but to investigate the intriguing beginnings of the Holy Cross Laundry which has evolved into a hugely successful business. The paper will focus on the early years of the refuge when people held more conservative views than today, and leans heavily on press reports.

It is difficult – impossible even - to reconcile today's image of the Woolloowin Magdalen Asylum as a place of grim solitude, prayer, repentance and hard labour with a 1900 *Queenslander* newspaper's description of its Christmas festivities:

... the refectory [was] festooned with flowers, interspersed with Christmas cards; the dormitories with cleverly-made paper flowers and ornaments; the cool larders off the kitchen plentifully stored with traditional dainties for the festival feast. On a centre table dozens of large plum-puddings, turkeys, hams, fowls, geese, cakes, confectionery – all in readiness..⁶

For Christians of all faiths, Christmas was and remains a time of joy, a celebration of the birth of Jesus, and it was traditional at the Woolloowin Refuge that the Sisters and residents would aside their work for an annual Christmas party. 'Delphia', the *Queenslander's* social columnist in 1900, was an invited guest at this function and we would expect the refuge to be decorated for such an occasion, but, as an outsider, she did not have to be invited.

Perhaps the Sisters were seeking publicity or even help with fundraising; it may have been an expression of their Christian faith or perhaps part of their plan to prepare women for a return to normal life. Whatever their motives, the Sisters were pleased with the outcome of the work they were doing, and customarily invited a reporter from one of the Brisbane newspapers to attend the festivities. His or her article would then appear during the Christmas season.

The newspaper account tells us that Brisbane's devout Catholics looked on Christmas as a universal festival, a day without 'class limitations' or 'social distinctions'. They were counselled to open their hearts to pity and likened the work of the refuge to the 'rescue work' of returning 'the lost sheep' to the fold. According to this analogy, the shepherds were the Sisters of Mercy whose mission and 'first act of piety towards Christ' was 'to appeal to the good that is in every nature; to help the progress of their erring sisters by making labour dignified and intelligent, and, by their teaching and discipline, place it within the reach of the poorest outcast'⁷.

It was a positive message, and Brisbane's Catholic community was proud of the work of the Sisters of Mercy at Woolloowin. Many of the guests travelled long distances to join in the party and generously supported the work of the refuge through financial donations and by providing Christmas gifts for the girls and babies. At that time the refuge seemed an open institution, happy to invite along a reporter from the *Queenslander* from whose article this information is drawn.

Delphia's column reflected on a shift towards self help in the way Queenslanders were thinking about charity:

In the early days of our century [presumably the 1800s], charity was little more than the sentimental pampering of paupers. '*Supported by Voluntary Contributions*' was the inscription over many of our British institutions. To-day, in many cases, this record may be substituted by '*Supported by the Efforts and Labour of the Inmates*' [my italics]. Here the Sisters have touched the keynote of progress and independence; they do not ask their sisters to eat the bread of charity in idleness, for they have learnt to be just to the individual, to recognise the elevating influence that self-help bestows, and the independence it represents in the struggles with the world.⁸

'Self-help' is the key word here, it was the lynchpin of reform. It was believed that the acquisition of marketable skills would break the poverty cycle – a reasonable enough proposition, given that Australia on the verge of federation in 1900 was a prosperous and confident country.

Admittedly, the accounts are one-sided, none of the so-called 'inmates' views are given, so that we cannot assess the situation through their eyes, only through those of the various reporters.

Holy Cross Retreat and Magdalen Asylum

The Magdalen Asylum was a memorial to Dr James O'Quinn, first Bishop of Brisbane, who died in 1881 and whose life and work were to be honoured by a monument to his memory:

At the first meeting held on the subject it was decided that this monument should take the form of a Magdalen Asylum which was very dear to 'the bishop's mind and heart'. The Sisters of Mercy and their benefactors had also been pushing for a Magdalen Asylum along the lines of those in Ireland. It was designed 'to afford shelter and to provide the means of earning an honest livelihood, to all fallen women, irrespective of creed, who express willingness to abandon their sinful course of life'. The Sisters of Mercy at All Hallows Convent, under the direction of Sister M. R. Quirke as Superior were entrusted with the responsibility of managing the refuge.⁹

The Woolloowin refuge and laundry were part of the same complex, an arm of a world-wide initiative of the Catholic Church, specifically of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, to deal with the 'problem of unmarried mothers and their babies'. The Sisters founded their Order the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, in France in 1835, expanded to London in 1841, Limerick in 1848 and elsewhere throughout the colonies. In addition to the standard vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, the Sisters took a fourth vow of zeal for souls, particularly those of women and girls, and bound themselves 'to labour for the conversion of fallen women and girls needing refuge from the temptation of the world'. They coined the term 'Magdalen Asylum' for their refuges and defined their duty as guiding the 'penitents', as they called them, towards redemption and salvation.¹⁰

The Order's founder Catherine McAuley and Mother Vincent Whitty (one of the small band of Sisters of

Mercy who arrived in Brisbane with Bishop Quinn in 1861), were so favourably impressed by a good Shepherd Magdalen laundry they visited in Dublin, that they set up their own laundry at Glasthule, Ireland. A great deal of care and money was invested in the Asylum. Nothing about the project was shoddy. A fine, elevated, fourteen acre site, 'with a bracing climate and all the good effects of a sanatorium', just six kilometres from the city was selected for the refuge.¹¹ The Sisters commissioned Queensland's foremost colonial architect Francis Drummond Greville, (F.D.G.) Stanley (1839-1897) to design a plan for the Asylum and laundry, and an excellent builder contracted. The result was a large, airy two-storey but rather austere looking brick construction.

Dr. Robert Dunne, Archbishop of Brisbane, laid and blessed the Foundation Stone on Sunday 22 **April 1888**, in the 'presence of a considerable company of clergy and laity'.¹² At the conclusion of the service the archbishop reminded everyone that money for the project had been raised through cathedral subscriptions throughout the diocese. In seven years, £2,269 16s. 2d including interest had been collected, of which £600 would be paid to the distinguished sculptor Achille Simonetti (1838–1900) for a statue of Bishop O'Quinn.¹³ Robert Dunne used the opportunity to appeal for more funds and an additional £200 was collected. Brisbane's Catholic parishioners were exceedingly generous in supporting the project.

The remaining £1,600,10s.2d., boosted to £3,174,12s.7d. through additional donations, was set aside for the Asylum. It was a very substantial sum in the 1880s and

demonstrated great support for the refuge. The contract price for the building was £4,700 with additional funding needed to pay for the furniture and specialist laundry equipment. It was a huge undertaking for the Sisters of Mercy on top of their work at All Hallows' School and plans for the Mater Hospital. It is important to note that provision for an industrial-sized laundry housing state of the art industrial equipment was incorporated into the plans from the outset.

The Residents and Life in the Refuge: women, girls, mothers and their infants

Whilst we have solid eyewitness accounts of the physical appearance of the refuge and laundry, we have exceedingly little evidence of life in the Asylum, of the human experience. By today's standards it was hard on the girls and women. They entered the Asylum when the pregnancy could no longer be hidden, in the third trimester, and remained there for several months – in later years they rarely returned after the birth. Their identities were concealed and protected. They were anonymous: given a new name along with a shapeless white shift to wear, and generally did not see their families or boyfriends for the duration of their stay. In short they were shamed and ostracised 'penitents'. They were expected to work hard scrubbing floors, doing kitchen work and cleaning the living areas of the refuge which constantly impressed visitors with its immaculate appearance. To compensate the Sisters for their care and enable them to take in other girls, they were required to do so many hours of laundry work. They were discouraged from befriending their

fellow inmates and some would have found it difficult to adjust to living with rougher girls from different backgrounds. And then there was the trauma of birth – not to mention the pain of giving up their babies. In the early days the mothers did spend time - sufficient to bond - with their infants. A Sister looked after the babies during the day, but at night the mothers cared for them in a second storey room specifically set aside for the mothers and babies.

As it was a Mercy religious institution the women were required to rise early for chapel. Indeed, a special transept wing was added to the Church of the Holy Cross for them to pray in privacy. A religious priest conducted a three day annual retreat for them; and on Christmas Day 1926 six masses were held in ‘the retreat chapel’.¹⁴ The Church considered that ‘this, as well as the many other spiritual blessings received during their stay in the home, helped them to rise to higher levels - not only of social comforts but knowledge of virtue and religious practice’.¹⁵ From the *Forgotten Australians* report 2003-2004 we know that such efforts were greatly resented by some of the women.

Yet one of our early reporters must have been thinking about how the women felt as he or she wrote: ‘in all there are 76 women in this institution, and one cannot but be struck with the air of cheerfulness and contentment which pervades throughout [the Christmas festivities]’.¹⁶ Alternatively, a visiting *Daily Mail* reporter became emotional in reflecting on her visit to the refuge in 1918. ‘From time to time’, she wrote,

the story of a girl's despair gets into the newspapers to shock and startle comfortable, easy-going people, with the realisation of the misery and suffering which must have been the portion of the young mother's mind, until almost unhinged with fear and anxiety, she leaves her baby to end its life, and perhaps her own.¹⁷

People of today probably cannot empathize with the terror and absolute despair felt by a young pregnant girl a century ago and several were reported to be just fourteen years of age.

The health of the girls or women was judged 'generally good' in the early 1900s, arguably because of their age and rural to light urban backgrounds, but 'from various causes', not all were fit enough to work, and many 'were unable to contribute any work to their support'.¹⁸ We are not told why; whether it was on medical advice, advanced pregnancy or rebelliousness. The 1906 Annual Report wistfully commented: 'were the establishment filled by inmates all in perfect health, it would be self-supporting', but 'considering the lives that many of them have led' this could not be expected. It was hoped that the healthy environment, regular hours, nourishing food and 'passions kept under control' would enable the Sisters to report on 'those under their charge as thoroughly renovated in bodily as well as spiritual health'.¹⁹

We learn that in 1900 some of the mothers were Aboriginal girls with mixed race babies and some of the elder girls were admitted 'through Mr. Meston's kind endeavours'.²⁰ Archibald Meston (1851-1924), a former

journalist, civil servant and MLA for Rosewood, was the Southern Protector of Aboriginals for Queensland 1898-1903. Some of his ideas were embodied in the Aboriginals Protection Act of 1897.²¹ The passage suggests that some of these girls were coerced into the home, and their mixed race children were early representatives of the 'lost generation' (generally accepted as occurring between 1905 and 1969). The girls themselves were being groomed as domestic workers in keeping with the prevailing ideology of that time. One of the Sisters' tasks was to report on their charges before they could be discharged and they commented that these girls 'are amenable to discipline, and with systematic and sufficient training might become serviceable helps and industrious members of society.'²²

The Sisters were not happy for any of the residents to leave the refuge and 'what, to many, has been the nearest resemblance to a home they have known, until they were judged physically and morally capable of battling anew the difficulties of life'. In short, they had to demonstrate 'by their conduct that their connection with Holy Cross Retreat has been beneficial'.²³

Some special admissions were referred by the Qld Criminal Court. In 1948 Amelia, a pregnant seventeen-year old had served a month in gaol on remand before pleading guilty before a judge on five charges of house-breaking. The judge referred her to a Salvation Army Home and ordered her to 'remain there until her father could take her home', but, as a Catholic, Amelia would only agree 'to a home of her own religion'. The Crown Prosecutor made the arrangements with the Sisters of

Mercy who agreed to take her in, and she was discharged on a £100 good behaviour bond for three years. Her father had travelled up from NSW but told police he was unprepared to take his five-month pregnant daughter home, a view accepted by the judge as quite reasonable.

We do not know how the girl got to Brisbane or what drove her to burglary – possibly she was in a desperate situation. The judge's light sentence and concluding words: 'You will never be happy unless you give up the bad ways you have been following' suggests that he was somewhat sympathetic to her situation, but equally sympathetic that any decent family would not wish to reveal such a pregnancy.²⁴

It is only fair to note that this discipline applied to all the residents, including the Sisters themselves. Sister Mary Malachy, Superior at the Asylum 1900-1905, greatly impressed visitors with her energy and 'passion for work'. She identified her task as 'to help the helpless, to train to habits of domesticity and industry the untaught, and to minister to those in sore distress.'²⁵ Initially the Sisters lived with their charges at the refuge, with few comforts and little privacy. Their quarters were cramped and stuffy, and they longed for a dining room of their own, but could manage only 'a small, inconvenient, and unpleasantly situated corner'.²⁶ Their much longed for convent was finally built in 1913.²⁷

In 1906 just eleven Sisters of Mercy ran the refuge and laundry.²⁸ There were six major key areas in the work they were doing: maintaining the home and its grounds, caring for the physical needs of the women throughout pregnancy, post-partum and then neonatal care, pastoral

care and concern for the women's souls, education and rehabilitation for re-entering society – all this in addition to running a large commercial laundry on a profitable basis and meeting their own religious obligations. By any standards it was a daunting task. They also liaised with the Queensland Government to oversee the adoption of the babies. This entailed finding suitable parents and ensuring that they addressed the legal requirements of the day. The Catholic Church liked to see Catholic babies going to Catholic families. The children were valued by the new Australian Federal Government that sought to increase Australia's Caucasian 'British' population and its policy was to have them adopted by middle class families and raised as their own.

From 1867 to 1889 the women were transferred for the birth of their babies to the Lady Bowen Lying-In Hospital at Ann St, Brisbane and then, after its relocation, to Wickham Terrace. Before motorisation it would have entailed an uncomfortable buggy ride from Woolloowin. The Lady Bowen Hospital (1867-1938) 'provided hospital care for indigent, unmarried, or destitute women of Queensland and their babies' and was also an adoption agency. Although running a charitable institution themselves, the Sisters of Mercy paid fees to the hospital. From 1919 the mothers received specialist medical care from a visiting obstetrician from Royal Brisbane Women's Hospital. In 1938 the Lady Bowen hospital was closed and the mothers were admitted to RBWH.²⁹ We do not know how the Magdalen mothers fared during their confinements in the 1900s, but it is recognised today that

the risk of birth complications increases with adolescent mothers.

It is, however, significant that between 1889 when the institution first opened until 1923, '1530 women received protection and help to begin a new course of life and 910 infants were cared and provided for'. Less than two thirds of the women bore children in that period so that some 600 were admitted for other reasons or were still expectant.³⁰

The Creche or Nursery

The *Queenslander* reports tell us little of the women and their babies, but there are a few recorded observations. In 1900 there were twenty-one babies in care, all being cared for by the Sisters, and often seen sleeping on an airy veranda. Our reporter 'Delphia' was probably non-Catholic as she seemed put off by the Sisters appearance:

Then we visited the creche, or nursery, where twenty-one little babies are lovingly cared for. They are so accustomed to the Sisters in their black habits that the sight of strangers makes them cry and hide their little faces—not all of them white faces, for there are half-caste bairns...³¹

Certainly the visitors were saddened by the sight of the 'innocent, helpless' babies in the nursery. A female reporter, visiting the children's day nursery on Christmas Eve 1902, conceded that although 'every effort has been made to give the cradles and their occupants a festive appearance, ... the sadness of it all eats into one's heart, and the wistful baby faces bring a lump into one's throat.

One can't put on paper what one feels about such scenes. With reluctance one leaves these poor mites...'³² Three years later in 1905, another reporter described the nursery as 'the most pathetic department of the institution', with thirty four infants in care – 'some well and strong, and a few pitifully pale and wasted' - but all sleeping peacefully on a cool veranda.³³ The reporters definitely found the crèche a more upsetting topic than the refuge or laundry.

The Holy Cross Laundry

As we have noted, the Holy Cross Laundry was considered an instrument, 'a means to an end', part of the 'philanthropic scheme of the institution'. It served two purposes: to provide a regular income that enabled the Sisters' work to continue and to teach the girls marketable skills.

It was impossible for the Sisters of Mercy to meet the ongoing expenses of feeding and housing considerable numbers of the women. They ran the refuge as a charity and did not levy admittance fees on the residents, but in return expected the women and girls to earn their keep through general housekeeping and laundry work. In 1906, for instance, the monthly average was over seventy-five women. Fees were payable to the Lady Bowen Hospital, together with the costs of maintaining 112 beds, provisioning, furnishings, napery, machinery and running expenses. 'Initially the refuge relied on charitable help, but even after the Sisters had established the laundry, the incidental costs of running a 112-bed

institution in 1906 consumed most of the profits.³⁴ The government subsidy was a mere £200 per annum at that time.³⁵

Irrespective of the help they received, the laundry work had to be completed professionally and on time, so the burden often fell to the Sisters. It is little wonder they praised the virtues of young women who were ‘attentive, docile and faithful in the discharge of the duties’.³⁶ If there were seventy women in care, perhaps thirty or so could be rostered for shifts in the laundry.³⁷

Thanks to a Brisbane journalist who was shown through the laundry workings, we have a 1902 description of the Holy Cross Laundry. First, it was busy with ‘huge bags of soiled linen’ from the *Jumna*, a 1,048 ton iron sailing ship built in 1867 for the transport of indentured labourers to the colonies.³⁸ The laundry had several such profitable shipping contracts and the work had to be completed before the ship departed.

Below is an eye-witness account of the laundry at the turn of the century: In one outhouse are piled cartloads of huge bags of soiled linen (used by the *Jumna* on her last voyage) which contain about 4000 pieces. Close to this shed is the washing-room, with its rows of fixed tubs and huge washing machines and rinsing and ‘blueing’ tubs, the wringers which are driven by steam power. At one end is the hot-air drying-room, with its rows of racks and iron doors, running on grooves. The next room is the most interesting perhaps to the casual visitor, for here one sees at work the various forms of ironing machines, which produce that wonderful polish which is the despair of those who iron by hand. Here one sees large damask

table-cloths passed between a couple of bright steel cylinders again and again until they have the appearance of satin. At the next machine, the cylinders, which are driven by steam power, are heated by gas, and a sister and her assistants are busily polishing the bosoms of shirts. This done, the garments are passed on to another machine, where the cuffs are similarly treated, and finally they are passed on to the hand ironers, who iron the bodies of the shirts. Collars are also polished in the same way, which is almost a fine art.

An adjoining room is fitted with long tables, at which the hand ironers are busily at work on every description of garments, for men, women, and children. When finished and aired the work, all passes into the folding and packing room, where one of the sisters examines and packs the clothing into neat parcels, which are quickly whisked away by the delivery vans.³⁹

The 15 HP boilers and engine were installed in a separate building under the charge of an engineer, and to ensure a reliable water supply for the steam and washing machines, an expensive 63,000 gallon capacity underground brick and concrete water storage tank was installed in 1902. Electricity was not installed until 1926.⁴⁰

Disappointingly for the Sisters, the laundry work and their diligent training of the mothers was insufficient to enable them to be self-supporting. In their drive to meet expenses, the Sisters were forced to seek additional funding to expand the laundry facilities in 1906-07 so that they could tackle even more work.⁴¹ With the most up to date equipment available, a growing reputation for

reliability and ‘crisp and spotless’ work, the Laundry managed to acquire additional shipping work, along with ordinary hotel and other trade work. In their pricing, the Sisters were mindful of ‘not undercutting ordinary tradesmen’.⁴²

To cope with the hectic workload, a new packing room was added to the laundry in 1905, and a new east wing completed over the next two years. For added efficiency a group of ‘practical workers’ was asked to redesign the ironing room, resulting in the installation of a series of new tiered stoves that could heat sixty-eight irons at once and relocating the shirt, cuff, and collar glossing machines and other contrivances into the ironing-room. The Sisters prayed that God and ‘kind friends’ would see a way through their mounting debts. As they saw it, there was no alternative but to push forwards with their ‘rescue work’.⁴³ By Christmas 1925, all 125 beds were filled, and the extra pressure of laundry work prevented any elaborate festivities.⁴⁴

People were noticing the refuge and it was fast becoming a Brisbane show piece for a philanthropic institution and welcomed many important visitors to its doors. For instance, Lady Lamington, wife of the Governor of Queensland, visited the refuge in May 1898 (midway through his term of office 1896-1901). She was an important Vice-regal visitor, an aristocrat in her own right whose son was godson of Queen Victoria, and a committed charity organiser, with a special concern for orphans and mothers. Interestingly the Lamington family home was in Lanarkshire Scotland where the social reformer Robert Owen had established a model cotton

factory run along utopian socialist principles for the labouring poor 1800-58.

The Sisters felt the set up and laundry workplace ‘made a pleasing impression on her ladyship’ and that she was genuinely interested in what she saw of the dormitories, nursery, refectory and the laundry, mangling, glossing and ironing rooms. Her support became even more tangible when she asked that her name be added to the institution’s annual subscribers list.⁴⁵

Public Opinion: attitudes of the parishioners and general public towards the Magdalen refuge

Today’s negative views of these institutions which were set up in each of Australia’s capital cities, excluding Darwin and Canberra, between 1863-1941 are totally at odds with contemporary views.⁴⁶ If we accept the role of newspapers in shaping or reflecting public opinion then we can infer that the public wholeheartedly endorsed the work of the Sisters of Mercy at Woolloowin until the 1950s. The *Brisbane Courier* in 1901 wrote: ‘the institution has in its own quiet and painstaking manner been uplifting this section of fallen humanity, and confirming wavering ones to persevere in amending their past lives’.⁴⁷ We have seen how one judge concurred that a decent father would not want a pregnant unmarried daughter living openly in his home. Such were the attitudes of the day, and we find the descriptions ‘fallen humanity’, ‘sinful’ ‘unhappy lives’ constantly repeated in the newspaper columns.

In summing up we must ask how successful the system was. At the turn of the last century, the outcome was very encouraging with apparently no recriminations. Of the 131 women admitted 1900-1901, 26 women took up positions arranged for them after their confinement, 16 were released into the care of friends, 2 left of their own accord, 2 were sent to other unspecified institutions and 2 were expelled by the sisters for insubordination, leaving some 75 women still in care (with 8 unaccounted for). Sixty children were under the Sisters' care, and of these 19 were under 'kindly shelter' and a few had been 'handed over' by the Police Court. Ten of these children were taken by friends, five were sent to St Vincent's Orphanage and one died in care.⁴⁸

The scheme worked well when it echoed general community values as we have seen in the newspaper reports of the 1890s to early 1900s. Success was measured by the following values in 1905: repentance, obedience, docility and hard work.⁴⁹ But in reality there were few alternatives for a pregnant and disowned girl in this period. At best, a girl might be banished to a distant relative (often a paid arrangement), be desperate enough to agree to long hours of work in return for food and lodgings, or at worst turn to crime, vice or the street, or even be driven to suicide.

By the 2000s our attitudes have changed radically. The sexual revolution of the 1970s tended to alter our views of promiscuity. Most - though not all - people no longer regard unwanted pregnancy as sinful, with the mothers referred to as 'magdalens' or 'penitents'. The old views became obsolete when our attitudes to single mothers

and abused or deserted women became more tolerant. Government welfare benefits enable them to rise above the desperate straits of a century ago and to avoid institutional care. Magistrates try to protect domestic violence victims by issuing protective orders. Although difficult, single women can raise their own children with government support if necessary, and even our definition of a family is changing, with some groups considering pregnancy, a right.

The Magdalen Women's Refuge was demolished in the 1970s as the result of internal and external changes, but the laundry, however, was hugely successful and continues to operate profitably in the modern world.

Today the Holy Cross Laundry is firmly established as a quality provider of commercial linen services, including specialist hospital work, to its Brisbane clients. It is intriguing to find the name or initials HCL stencilled on fresh and used linen bags in our hospitals and aged care homes. We have seen how it was founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1889 as an unusual blending of philanthropic and commercial services, and is recognised today as Australia's longest-serving commercial laundry, with 127 years of history. Although no longer owned by the Sisters of Mercy, it has evolved several times over but still supports less able people in our community⁵⁰. The Sisters admit to being 'incredibly proud' that it has become 'one of Australia's leading examples of a fully integrated workplace'.⁵¹

As the volume of work increased the laundry outgrew its original and extended premises, and has recently relocated to a new modern factory at Banyo. As before it

has installed the 'best state-of-the-art equipment available' but believes 'its people are our most valued asset'. Interestingly, the Holy Cross Laundry - now registered as a Public Benevolent Institution - still provides sheltered employment and training in a wide range of skills including, administration, truck driving, machinery maintenance, laundry work and more. Its Mission Statement, 'We care for our employees' health and well being and personal development', closely echoes that of earlier years.⁵²

Although the Asylum was demolished in 1978, the Holy Cross Laundry building was listed on the Queensland Heritage Register as an important entity in Queensland history in 1992. The citation recognises its cultural importance as the oldest charitable institutional laundry still functioning in Brisbane and which 'provides rare surviving evidence of the workhouse tradition, associated with a refuge for destitute women in the 19th century'. It also points to its 'important association with the Sisters of Mercy and their involvement in pioneering and maintaining charitable institutions in Queensland'. The building itself, a purpose-built bungalow designed by the former government architect FDG Stanley, is recognised as a valuable example of 'late 19th century institutional building style, demonstrating adjustments to regional climatic conditions in an industrial context', and it is also significant in terms of 1870s-1960s industrial training.⁵³

Sadly, today the building has been stripped of its wonderful array of fascinating machinery, and the Sisters of Mercy have put part of their property on the real estate market where it has already interested unit developers.⁵⁴ Hopefully, the historic laundry building will be protected well into the future by its heritage listing.

¹ 'The Magdalen Asylum. Laying the Foundation-Stone', *The Week (Brisbane, Qld: 1876 – 1934)*, **28 April 1888**, p 23. Trove online newspapers have been used throughout this paper.

² 'Holy Cross Retreat, Woolloowin, Brisbane', *Catholic Press (Sydney, NSW:1895 - 1942)*, **26 July 1923**, p 20.

³ 'Magdalen Asylum', *Brisbane Courier (Qld: 1864 - 1933)* **26 Dec. 1905**, p 4.

⁴ The Australian Senate's inquiry into the extent and legacy of abuse considered the testimonies and experiences of up to 80,000 former state wards in government and church orphanages and foster homes between the 1920s and 1970s. The evidence is compelling refer: Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care - Summary <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/guide/vic/E000159...>; 'Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care' – Parliament [...www.aph.gov.au](http://www.aph.gov.au) › ... › Completed Inquiries 2004-07; Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care [...https://www.mackillop.org.au/submission-to-the-senate-inquiry-into...](https://www.mackillop.org.au/submission-to-the-senate-inquiry-into...) accessed 4 March 2015.

⁵ Romero's art was displayed in the 'Inside' Exhibition National Gallery Canberra (with an accompanying online exhibition), 2011-12, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article21754696>, accessed 4 March 2015.

⁶ 'Magdalen Asylum & Holy Cross Laundry', *Queenslander* (1866-1939), 13 Jan. 1900, p 78. There are many similar newspaper accounts such as 'Holy Cross Retreat', *Brisbane Courier (Queensland:1864 - 1933)*, 25 Dec. 1902, p. 5; 'The Magdalen Asylum' *Brisbane Courier, (Queensland:1864 - 1933)*, **26 Dec. 1905**, p 4; 'The Holy Cross Retreat, Woolloowin', *The Telegraph (Brisbane: 1872-1947)*, 26 Dec. 1916, p. 9; 'Where New Hope is

Born: Holy Cross Retreat and Magdalen Asylum', *Daily Mail (Brisbane, Qld: 1903 - 1926)*, **1 Jan. 1918, p.6.**

⁷ 'Magdalen Asylum & Holy Cross Laundry', *Queenslander* (Brisbane: 1866-1939), 13 Jan. 1900, p.78.

⁸ 'Magdalen Asylum and Holy Cross Laundry', *Queenslander* (Brisbane: 1866-1939), 4 Jan. 1900, p.78.

⁹ 'The Magdalen Asylum. Laying the Foundation-stone'. *The Week (Brisbane, Qld: 1876 - 1934)* **28 April 1888**, p 23.

¹⁰ 'Sisters of the Good Shepherd – National Museum of Australia', nma.gov.au/blogs/inside/tag/sisters-of-the-good-shepherd/, accessed 18 June 2015; Sue Keays, unpublished paper. 'The Woolloowin Magdalen Asylum; a misguided charitable initiative?'

¹¹ 'Holy Cross Retreat, Woolloowin, Brisbane', *Catholic Press (Sydney, NSW: 1895 - 1942)*, **26 July 1923**, p 20.

¹² Amongst those present were the Rev. Fathers Dorrigan, T. O'Connell, and P. Corrigan, Mr. Justice Mein, Captain Butcher, Dr. Mc'Neally, and Messrs. J. F. Lyons and G. W. Gray. 'The Magdalen Asylum. Laying the Foundation-stone'. *The Week (Brisbane, Qld: 1876 - 1934)*, **28 April 1888**, p. 23.

¹³ The Cathedral clergy certainly contracted the top man for the task. Simonetti immigrated to Brisbane at the instigation of Bishop O'Quinn in 1871, then relocated to Sydney where he set up a large studio at Balmain. His work on St John's College, (University of Sydney) and other commissions made him Sydney's most fashionable sculptor and earned him an international reputation. 'Achille Simonetti' - Australian Dictionary of Biography...

adb.anu.edu.au/biography/simonetti-achille-4580 - original article published in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 6, (MUP), 1976 ed., accessed 23 Sept. 2016.

¹⁴ 'Holy Cross Retreat at Christmas Festivities', *Brisbane Courier (Qld: 1864 - 1933)*, 28 Dec. 1926, p.9.

¹⁵ 'Holy Cross Retreat, Woolloowin, Brisbane', *Catholic Press (Sydney, NSW: 1895 - 1942)*, **26 July 1923**, p 20.

¹⁶ 'The Holy Cross Magdalen Asylum', *Telegraph* (Brisbane 1872-1947), 26 Dec. 1904, p.7.

¹⁷ 'Where New Hope is Born: Holy Cross Retreat and Magdalen Asylum', *Daily Mail (Brisbane, Qld.: 1903 - 1926)*, **1 January 1918, p.6.**

¹⁸ ‘Holy Cross Retreat’, *Brisbane Courier (Qld: 1864 – 1933)*, 1906, p.16.

¹⁹ ‘Holy Cross Retreat, Woolloowin, Brisbane’, *The Catholic Press (Sydney, NSW: 1895 - 1942)*, **26 July 1923**, p.20.

²⁰ ‘Magdalene Asylum and Holy Cross Laundry’, *Queenslander*, 4 Jan. 1900, p.78.

²¹ S. E. Stephens, 'Meston, Archibald (1851–1924)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/meston-archibald-4191/text6741>, published in hardcopy 1974, accessed online 17 June 2016. **This article was first published in hardcopy in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 5, (MUP), 1974. Accessed 30 March 2016.**

²² ‘Magdalene Asylum and Holy Cross Laundry’, *Queenslander*, 4 Jan. 1900, p.78.

²³ ‘Holy Cross Retreat’, *Brisbane Courier (Qld: 1864 – 1933)*, 1906, p.16; ‘Holy Cross Retreat, Woolloowin, Brisbane’, *The Catholic Press (Sydney, NSW: 1895 - 1942)*, **26 July 1923**, p.20.

²⁴ ‘Church to Help: Girl Gets Bond’, *Brisbane Telegraph (Qld.: 1948 - 1954)*, **14 May 1948**, p.8.

²⁵ ‘Magdalen Asylum’, *Brisbane Courier*, 26 Dec. 1905, p.4

²⁶ ‘The Report of the Holy Cross Retreat (Magdalen Asylum), Woolloowin, for the year ending December 31, 1897’ as forwarded to the *Telegraph* (Brisbane, Qld: 1872 - 1947), 10 May 1898, p.6.

²⁸ ‘Holy Cross Retreat’, *Brisbane Courier (Qld: 1864 – 1933)*, 28 Dec. 1906, p. 16.

²⁹ Lady Bowen Hospital - Summary | Find & Connect, <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/guide/qld/QE00455>, accessed 27 Sept. 2016.

³⁰ ‘Holy Cross Retreat, Woolloowin, Brisbane’. *Catholic Press (Sydney, NSW: 1895 - 1942)*, **26 July 1923**, p. 20.

³¹ ‘Magdalene Asylum and Holy Cross Laundry’, *Queenslander*, 4 Jan. 1900, p.78.

³² ‘Holy Cross Retreat’, *Brisbane Courier (Qld: 1864 - 1933)*, 25 Dec. 1902, p. 5.

³³ ‘The Magdalen Asylum’, *Brisbane Courier (Qld: 1864 - 1933)*, **26 Dec. 1905**, p. 4.

-
- ³⁴ ‘Magdalen Asylum’, *Brisbane Courier (Qld: 1864 - 1933)* **28 Dec. 1906**, p 16.
- ³⁵ ‘Magdalen Asylum’, *Brisbane Courier (Qld: 1864 - 1933)*, 7 June 1901, p.6.
- ³⁶ Reported in ‘Magdalen Asylum’, *Brisbane Courier (Qld: 1864 - 1933)*, 26 Dec. 1905, p.4
- ³⁷ This seems an average sort of figure for the time eg ‘Magdalen Asylum’, *Brisbane Courier (Qld: 1864 - 1933)*, **26 Dec. 1905**, p 4.
- ³⁸ ‘Jumna’ (ship) – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jumna_\(ship\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jumna_(ship)), accessed 30 Sept. 2016.
- ³⁹ ‘Holy Cross Retreat’ *Brisbane Courier (Qld: 1864 – 1933)*, 25 Dec. 1902, p. 5.
- ⁴⁰ ‘Holy Cross Retreat at Christmas Festivities’, *Brisbane Courier (Qld: 1864 – 1933)*, 28 Dec. 1926, p.9.
- ⁴¹ ‘Magdalen Asylum’, *Brisbane Courier (Qld: 1864 - 1933)* **26 Dec. 1905**, p 4.
- ⁴² ‘Holy Cross Refuge’, *Telegraph*, 26 Dec. 1904, p. 7 - contains excerpts from 1905 Annual Report (issued end of 1904).
- ⁴³ ‘Magdalen Asylum’, *Brisbane Courier*, 26 Dec. 1905, p.4; Holy Cross Refuge’, *Telegraph*, 26 Dec. 1904, p. 7.
- ⁴⁴ ‘Holy Cross Retreat Christmas Festivities’, *Brisbane Courier (Qld: 1864 – 1933)*, 28 Dec. 1926, p. 9.
- ⁴⁵ ‘The Report of the Holy Cross Retreat (Magdalen Asylum), Wooloowin, for the year ending December 31, 1897’ as forwarded to the *Telegraph* (Brisbane, Qld: 1872 - 1947), 10 May 1898, p.6.
- ⁴⁶ The Good Shepherd Sisters set up nine Magdalen Asylums and convent laundries in Australia 1863-1941, including one at Mitchelton (Now Mt St Maria’s College). ‘Sisters of the Good Shepherd- National Musum of Australia. Nma.gov.au/blogs/inside/tag/sisters-of-the-good-shepherd, accessed 17 March 2014.
- ⁴⁷ ‘The Magdalen Asylum’, *Brisbane Courier* (Qld: 1864 - 1933), 7 June 1901, p.6.
- ⁴⁸ ‘Magdalen Asylum Annual Report’, *Brisbane Courier* (Qld: 1864 - 1933), 7 June 1901, p. 6.
- ⁴⁹ ‘Magdalen Asylum’, *Brisbane Courier (Qld: 1864 - 1933)*, **26 Dec.1905**, p.4.

⁵⁰ Editorial note: The Laundry is currently owned and operated by Mater Health Services Ltd.

⁵¹ "General Employment". Holy Cross Laundry–Home – Commerical Laundry and Linen hcl.org.au Retrieved 30 December 2014.

⁵² "General Employment". Holy Cross Laundry–Home – Commerical Laundry and Linen hcl.org.au Retrieved 30 December 2014.

⁵³ "Holy Cross Laundry (entry 600359)". *Queensland Heritage Register*. Queensland Heritage Council. Retrieved 1 August 2014; Holy Cross Laundry, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_Cross_Laundry, accessed 1 August 2014.

⁵⁴ Sisters of Mercy to sell prime Brisbane property | afr.com www.afr.com/real-estate/sisters-of-mercy-to-sell-prime-brisbane... , accessed 3 Oct. 2016.